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## THE HELEN EPISODE IN VERGIL'S *AENEID*

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Vergil's story of the terrible night when Troy fell into the hands of her Greek foes culminates in the tragic scene of Priam's murder. Pyrrhus first strikes down Polites at his father's feet, and then slays the old king himself in the presence of Hecuba and her daughters, and upon the very altar at which this ill-starred family had sought refuge. This act of almost incredible impiety is witnessed by Aeneas himself, whose thoughts turn with horror to his own aged father, his forlorn Creusa, his plundered home, and his little son. He looks about. His followers have vanished and he is alone. At this moment, from his lofty position on the palace-roof, the hero espies Helen lurking by the altar of Vesta. Driven to frenzy as he is, this glimpse of her who was the primal cause of his country's ruin inspires him with the thought of revenge. "Surely," he cries, "it is monstrous that she should return as a queen to her Spartan home, while my country lies prostrate in ashes. No renown does one win for slaying a woman, yet praise shall be my meed if I blot out this unholy thing and exact a just recompense; and it will give me joy to fill my soul with the fire of vengeance and satisfy the ashes of my kindred."

Such words Aeneas blurted out and in his frantic state was rushing on to slay her, when his mother appeared, in all her divine radiance, caught him by the hand, and calmed his fury. "Whither," she cried, "has thy love for me fled? Wilt thou not first see to it, where thou hast left thy aged father, Anchises, whether Creusa thy wife and the boy Ascanius still live? . . . Did not my love prevent, ere this the flames had destroyed them and the hostile sword had drunk their blood. It is not the hated face of the Laconian woman, daughter of Tyndareus; it is not Paris that is to blame; but the gods, the relentless gods, overturn

this wealth, and make Troy topple from her pinnacle." Then Venus removes the cloud that veils his mortal vision, and allows him to see the gods themselves busy in the work of destruction. "Haste away, my son," thus she closes, "and put an end to the struggle. Nowhere will I leave thee, but will set thee safely on thy father's threshold."

We say it with confidence that, if this splendid passage had come down to us with the same manuscript authority as the rest of the *Aeneid*, not a word of protest would have been raised against its authenticity. As it is, vv. 567-88 have been preserved in none of the first-class manuscripts, and such of the later ones as give them probably depend upon Servius, who is our only real authority for them, and who inserts them in the introduction to his commentary on the *Aeneid*, explaining that, like the four lines of the prooemium, they had been withdrawn from the epic by Varius and Tucca, Vergil's literary executors. In his note on ii. 592 Servius refers to the matter a second time, saying:

ut enim in primo diximus, aliquos hinc versus constat esse sublato, nec immerito. nam et turpe est viro forti contra feminam irasci, et contrarium est Helenam in domo Priami fuisse illi rei, quae in sexto dicitur, quia in domo est inventa Deiphobi, postquam ex summa arce vocaverat Graecos. hinc autem versus esse sublato, Veneris verba declarant dicentis, "non tibi Tyndaridis facies invisa Lacaenae."

Thus Servius gives two reasons which are supposed to have led Varius and Tucca to expunge the lines in question.

Modern scholars have found additional reasons for rejecting the lines, and as a rule go farther than Servius, by denying that they were ever composed by Vergil at all. Thus Thilo (p. xxxii of his edition) objects that the passage is really foreign to the poet's purpose. The writer supposed that Venus was to intervene in order to protect Helen from the hero's anger, whereas her object was to restrain Aeneas from fighting and deliver him from his perils. To this we reply that with Servius we recognize in 601 a distinct reference to the discarded passage, for that verse has little point if the preceding lines are removed.

Again, says Thilo, in 570 Aeneas is said to be wandering about when he spies Helen *secreta in sede latentem*. Yet in

632 we learn that not until he has had the revelation of the gods does he come down from the palace-roof. Here again we refuse to admit the inconsistency, for we need not suppose with Heyne that in the Helen-scene Aeneas has descended to the ground. In fact, it was the hero's advantageous position aloft that enabled him to discover Helen, the flames lighting up the whole scene (569). Minor objections apply mainly to the language. Thus in 568 (*limina Vestae servantem*) *servare* is used of remaining a short time in a place, but elsewhere of a settled abode. But, as Henry points out, *servare* here as elsewhere means "to keep close to;" cf. ii. 711: *longe servet vestigia coniunx*, "keep in the footsteps;" ii. 450: *has servant agmine denso*, "keep fast beside;" *G.* iv. 459: *hydram moritura puella | servantem ripas alta non vidit in herba*, "hugging the banks." Again in 576 *sceleratas poenas*, according to Thilo, would be an appropriate expression if used later by Aeneas, when his anger had cooled, and he was reflecting upon the vengeance he had conceived. This would be a point well taken if the expression meant "horrible" or, as Henry translates it, "damnable punishment." But *sceleratas* is used as in vi. 563 *sceleratum insistere limen*, "no pure soul may tread the threshold of the guilty," and therefore *sceleratas poenas* is precisely the same as *scelerum poenas* in xi. 258. If *sceleratas poenas* passes muster, we need not be troubled by *merentis poenas* in 585, 586, whether *merentis* be regarded as a genitive or better as in agreement with *poenas*.

The only real difficulty in the text as given by Servius is in 587, where *ultricis famam* is certainly corrupt, but the reading given by early editions and generally adopted, *ultricis flammae*, though pronounced unintelligible by Thilo, gives a fine metaphor with a very satisfactory sense. That the punishment of Helen should be called a "victory" (584) seems to Thilo an inapt expression. It is hard to see why. Line 579

*coniugiumque domumque patres natosque videbit,*

was condemned even by Wagner, who supports the passage as a whole, and of course Thilo objects to it as inconsistent with the stories told elsewhere about Helen. But the main idea contained in the line—viz., Helen's return to her home and kin—is neces-

sary to point the contrast between the happy future of this Spartan adventuress and the desolation of Troy, while the use of the plural in *patres* and *natos*, though of her parents only her father Tyndareus survived, and though tradition assigns to Helen only one child, a daughter Hermione, is (as Page shows) only a rhetorical mode of exaggerating Helen's happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Heinze (*Virgils epische Technik*, pp. 45 f.—the most illuminating of recent books on the *Aeneid*) accepts the objections reported by Servius and made by modern scholars, but enlarges upon the ancient criticism: *turpe est viro forti contra feminam irasci*. The mere *irasci*, he says, would not have dishonored Aeneas, but Vergil would never have allowed his pious hero to conceive the thought of killing a defenseless woman, especially if she had sought refuge at the altar. How would this, he asks, befit one who has just narrated with horror the story of an altar-desecration? Again, if 601,

non tibi Tyndaridis facies invisa Lacaenae,

points to the introduction of Helen in the preceding context, what about *culpatusve Paris* (602), of whom Aeneas has not so much as thought in the whole situation? And finally, the words,

scilicet haec Spartam incolumis patriasque Mycenae  
aspiciet, etc. (577 f.),

if genuine, would furnish the only soliloquy in the narrative of the second and third books. This seems to Heinze "unnatürlich und frostig," and he would be loath to attribute such tastelessness to Vergil. Heinze therefore holds that this passage is spurious, but, in view of the sequel, believes that this has taken the place of a genuine Vergilian passage, in which the hero, giving way to despair, has decided to go to his death, either by plunging into the midst of the enemy or, as is more probable, by taking his own life. Hence *dextra prehensum continuit* (592) is explained, not by a contemplated attack on Helen, but by a contemplated act of suicide.

<sup>1</sup>The "metrische Kleinigkeiten" which Norden notes (edit. of *Aen.* vi, p. 255) certainly do not disprove Vergilian authorship. Synaloephae, involving forms of *Troia*, are, as Norden himself shows (p. 447), not uncommon in Vergil. So *Troiae et* (573) = *Troiae et* (x. 214), and *Troiā arserit* (581) = *Troiā antiqua* (iv. 312).

Heinze's argument is, I am convinced, an elaborate example of special pleading. The soliloquy will appeal to most readers as unusually impressive, and from the artistic standpoint seems to be modeled with great care. Thus Wagner comments on the beautiful balance between the three questions in the simple future *aspiciet*, *ibit*, and *videbit*, and the three in the future-perfect, *occiderit*, *arserit*, and *sudarit*, the correspondence being in inverse order. As Page puts it: "3. 4 her home happy, my king murdered; 2. 5 she in triumph, Troy in flames; 1. 6 she safe at Sparta, the Dardan coast reeking with blood." As to *culpatusve Paris*, this is only a corollary to the previous words about Helen. If *she* can arouse such anger, so also surely can her guilty paramour. The two have the force of a plural. It is no human agents you must accuse. It is the gods themselves who are responsible for Troy's downfall. And Heinze's idea that vv. 601, 602 would be natural enough apart from a previous passage involving Helen or Paris seems to me to be quite alien to the directness of Vergilian narrative, though it may easily be paralleled in Greek tragedy, especially in lyrical passages. As Heinze himself has seen, Vergil may well have had in mind here the famous passage in the *Iliad* iii. 164, 165:

οὐ τί μοι αἰτή ἐσσί, θεοί νύ μοι αἰτιοί εἰσιν,  
οἳ μοι ἐφώρμησαν πόλεμον πολύδακρυν Ἀχαιῶν.

Here we have the directness of epic style. The words are addressed by Priam to Helen. So, too, all is simple and direct in Vergil, if, as we believe, Helen is present in the scene; but how much less natural if, as Heinze holds, Venus mentions her merely as the ultimate cause of Troy's downfall?

Finally, as to *contra feminam irasci*, the kernel of the argument is removed if we remember that Aeneas never carries his thought into action, and therefore the sin, if sin it is, is only contemplated, not committed. Though Aeneas was a saint in the Middle Ages, it is surely going too far to test him by the lofty standard set up in the Sermon on the Mount when Christ said: "I say unto you, that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment." Further, the hero himself anticipates the objection and offers a defense of his action:

namque etsi nullum memorabile nomen  
 feminea in poena est nec habet victoria laudem,  
 exstinxisse nefas tamen et sumpsisse merentis  
 laudabor poenas. (583 ff.)

That Helen is a *nefas*, an unholy thing, is (at least at such a time) a sufficient defense against the charge of impiety.

An Homeric situation somewhat similar to this Helen episode is one to which sufficient weight has never been given. Henry calls attention to the resemblance, but has not attempted to develop the parallelism. At the opening of *Odyssey* xx Odysseus lies down to rest in the *πρόδομος*, but his active mind will not suffer him to sleep.

And the women came forth from the house, they who aforetime consorted with the suitors, making laughter and mirth with one another. Then the hero's heart was stirred within his breast, and much he debated in mind and soul whether he should leap upon them and deal death to each, or suffer them to consort with the proud wooers, for the last and latest time. And his heart growled within him. And even as a bitch, stalking round her tender whelps, growls at a man she knows not, and is eager for the fight, even so his heart growled within him, from wrath at their evil deeds. And smiting on his breast, he rebuked his heart, saying: "Endure, my heart; even a baser thing didst thou once endure, on that day when the Cyclops devoured my valiant company; but still thou didst endure, till thy craft brought thee from out the cave, where thou didst think to die."

And as he tossed from side to side, debating how he might lay his hands upon the shameless suitors, one man against many, Athene descended from heaven, and came near to him, in form like unto a woman.

And she stood over his head and spake to him, saying: "Wherefore again art thou watching, most ill-fated of all men? Is not this thy house, and is not thy wife within and thy child, even such as one would wish his son to be?"

Here, as in Vergil, the hero meditates the slaying of women, but does not carry the thought into action. Here too the hero soliloquizes, and here too a *deus ex machina* appears on the scene. In Homer, Athene reminds Odysseus of his home, his wife and child; and in Vergil, Venus reminds Aeneas of his father, his wife and son, though even closer is the parallel in 562:

subiit deserta Creusa  
et direpta domus et parvi casus Iuli.

And still further, as Athene chides Odysseus for his lack of confidence in divine aid, and assures him of her protection to the last: "Stubborn one!" she cries, "surely, many a man puts trust in a comrade, though he be weaker, one who is but a mortal, and hath not such wisdom as mine; whereas I am a god, who preserve thee to the end, amid all toils" (45 ff.); so in Vergil Venus, "manifesting the goddess" *confessa deam* (591), reproves her son, first for his frenzy, *quid furis?* (595), but secondly for forgetting her, *quonam nostri tibi cura recessit?* (whither has thy love [regard] for me vanished?)—and the Homeric parallel is sufficient to determine the exact meaning of this rebuke, which does not mean that Venus is wounded in her feelings because he has thought of attacking her protégée Helen, or because she has a special interest in Anchises, but because (as Conington puts it) "Aeneas by losing self-command showed that he had lost confidence in his mother and sense of his relation to her." Then at the close of their interview, she promises unfailing support:

nusquam abero et tutum patrio te limine sistam (620).

The parallel is fairly complete, and the conclusion seems irresistible that as this Homeric scene must have been in the mind of him who composed the Helen-episode, as well as of the author of the succeeding lines, *the whole of the passage involved, the doubtful and undoubted lines alike, must be the work of one and the same poet, viz., Vergil himself.*

It remains for us now to consider what view we are to take of the omission of vv. 567–88 from Vergilian MSS. Assuming that the passage was written by Vergil, it is evident that it was omitted from the original complete *Aeneid* as edited by Varius and Tucca. These editors therefore had some reason for expunging the lines. According to the account in Servius, Augustus commanded Tucca and Varius to emend the *Aeneid*, with this limitation, that they should remove superfluities, yet make no additions (*ut superflua demerent, nihil adderent tamen*), and both the prooemium and the lines in question are given as



examples of passages removed. They were therefore considered *superflua*. A similar statement is made by Suetonius, who, however, cites only the prooemium as an example of the *versus dempti*, on the authority of the grammarian Nisus. Apart from these two passages, we learn of no omissions (at least of any consequence) due to the editors.

It is well known that Varius and Tucca had been intimate friends of our poet for many years. Vergil mentions Varius in *Ecl.* ix. 35, a poem which belongs to 41 B. C., about which time Vergil first made the acquaintance of Maecenas and probably of Varius too. Horace mentions Plotius (i. e., Tucca), Varius, and Vergil as meeting the rest of the company at Sinuessa on that famous journey to Brundisium, described in the fifth satire of his first book, written not later than 37 B. C. The three, who are grouped together in the beautiful description

animae quales neque candidiores  
terra tulit neque quis me sit devinctior alter

were evidently close friends at that time, eighteen years before Vergil's death. Again in 35 B. C. the three are once more bracketed together and associated with Maecenas, as poets and critics whose approval Horace proudly claims (*Serm.* i. 10. 81).

Of Tucca as a poet we know next to nothing, but both Tacitus (*Dial.* 12) and Quintilian (x. 1. 98) speak of the *Thyestes* of Varius as a tragedy of surpassing excellence. Horace often speaks of the literary work of Varius. He was considered Rome's best epic writer (*Serm.* i. 10. 43, written in 35 B. C.) until the *Aeneid* appeared, and Vergil and Varius are classed together as the greatest poets of the day in *Epp.* ii. 1. 247 and the *Ars poetica* 55. Probably no Roman was more worthy of the confidence of Vergil in things literary than Varius.

Suetonius tells us that Vergil made Varius and Tucca his residuary legatees, so that this friendship continued unbroken to the end. We may feel sure that if any friends were in a position to learn the poet's literary habits, plans, and problems, these intimate and cultivated men were in their number. It would seem that Varius even wrote a memoir upon Vergil, for Quintilian (x. 3. 8.) cites him as authority for the statement that the great

poet wrote a very small number of lines in one day. Perhaps, too, it was from such a memoir that Suetonius secured his interesting information about the poet's *modus operandi*. For example (§§ 23 ff.), he tells us that Vergil "first drafted the *Aeneid* in prose, and, having arranged it in twelve books, proceeded to compose it bit by bit (*particulatim*), just as the fancy took him, without attacking subjects in due order. And, that nothing might stay his inspiration, he allowed some passages to remain imperfect, while others he bolstered up as it were with mediocre lines (*levis-simis versibus*), which he jestingly declared were inserted as props to support the structure, until the solid columns arrived." In this way the composition of the *Aeneid* consumed eleven years. Suetonius further tells us (§§ 31-34) that during the composition of the poem Vergil on certain occasions read his work to others, though not often, generally confining himself to passages about which he was in doubt, that he might take advantage of the judgment of his hearers.

From these important statements we may draw several inferences. In the first place, a work of such magnitude as the *Aeneid*, involving the use of a great variety of legendary and historical material, must, if composed bit by bit, and in irregular order, have been subject to numerous imperfections and inconsistencies, until the work of revision was complete. Hence the inconsistency of representing Helen on the night of Troy's fall, in the second book as in the house of Priam, and in the sixth as in the house of Deiphobus, is easily explained.

In the second place, parts at least of the *Aeneid* must have been more or less known before the edition of Varius and Tucca appeared. In illustration we have the well-known prophecy of Propertius in his third elegy (written about 26 B. C.) and several imitations of Vergilian lines in various passages in Propertius (see Nettleship's *Essay*, p. 67), written before Vergil's death. We have also the story in Suetonius that when in Spain, in 26 or 25 B. C., Augustus wrote entreating and even threatening letters to Vergil, to send him "either the first draft of the poem, or some single portion. Much later, when the material was at last complete, Vergil read to the emperor three books, the second, fourth,

and sixth," on which occasion Octavia fainted, when the poet reached the touching passage about Marcellus. The book here called by Suetonius the second must be our second, because, though later Nisus is quoted as saying that Varius changed the order of two books, transferring to the third place that which was then second, still the order known to Suetonius must have been the same as is now known to us.

In the third place, it was the poet's practice to discuss his doubts and difficulties with others, and doubtless the two to whom he turned most frequently were his two greatest literary friends, Varius and Tucca. These therefore were in all probability familiar with the poet's sentiments and conceptions, and though the emperor's commands prevented them from destroying the *Aeneid*, according to Vergil's express entreaty, yet they were in a position to see that, as far as possible, the poet's wishes should be carried out. I take it, then, that Vergil, possibly for the very reasons given by Servius, had expressed his dissatisfaction with the Helen episode, and his executors therefore decided to omit it. Inasmuch as the emperor's instructions prevented them from making additions, they were compelled to leave the context in an imperfect state. But the passage was already known to others, and was possibly published later by someone who regretted its omission. Indeed, the very fact of its omission from the first complete edition would bring it into notice, much as rejected poems of modern writers not infrequently are published by their biographers and reviewers.

In lieu of the substitute passage which we may well believe Vergil intended to compose, I think we are justified in retaining in our texts the one which Servius has preserved, believing, as I do, that though its author was dissatisfied with it, as indeed he was with the *Aeneid* as a whole, yet it is the work of Vergil himself, and that the second book suffers vastly more from its omission than from its insertion.